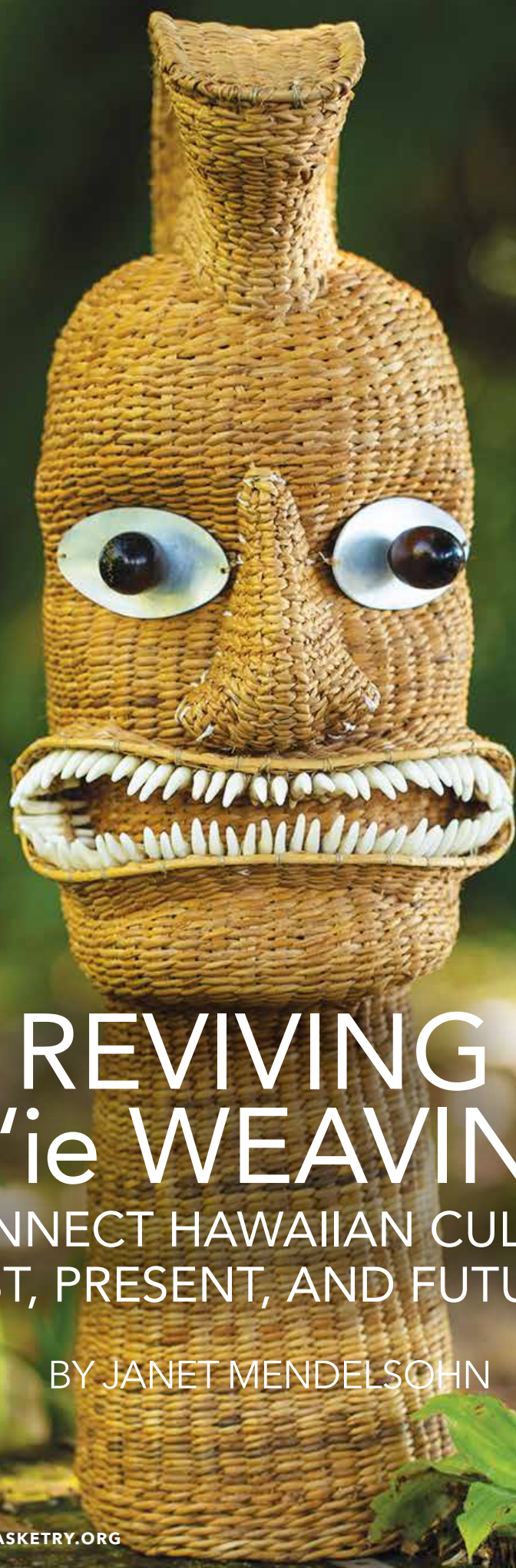


DANA EDMONDS



# REVIVING 'ie'ie WEAVING

TO CONNECT HAWAIIAN CULTURE'S  
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

BY JANET MENDELSON

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"People talk about the healing arts, meaning medical practice, but we think of weaving as a healing art," said Lloyd Harold Kumulā'au Sing Jr., a former Hawaiian Cultural Specialist with the Kamehameha Schools and an inaugural 2020 Luce Indigenous Knowledge Fellow.

With his wife, May Haunani Balino-Sing, Kumulā'au Sing is revitalizing an artform that once was at the core of Hawaiian culture: weaving with 'ie'ie (*Freycinetia arborea*), an aerial rootlet from a climbing vine. For centuries, the indigenous fiber was woven to produce baskets, fishing traps, *mahiolo* (chiefly helmets), and for creating fearsome representations of ancestral deities, or *ki'i akua* in Hawaiian. Traditionally, these gods protected the chiefs in the living world and cared for them in the afterlife. The *ki'i* were manifestations of Kū, the god of war, medicine, fishing, politics, and more. Wood, feathers, shells, and teeth of dogs and sometimes sharks were incorporated into the woven images that were passed from one generation to the next.

'Ie'ie weaving became a dying art after the overthrow of the Hawai'i monarchy. The Hawaiian Islands were first settled around 400 C.E. by Polynesians. By the time the first European, Capt. James Cook, arrived in 1778, Hawaiians had a thriving vibrant society and lived in large communities ruled by warring chieftains. In 1810, the islands were united into one kingdom by King Kamehameha I until 1893 when it was overthrown by agents of the United States, an action acknowledged by the US government.\* In 1898, at the behest of non-Native business interests, Hawai'i was annexed as a territory against the the will of its native people. In 1959, it became the 50th US state.

"Hawaiians continue to struggle since the loss of our sovereignty," says Kumulā'au Sing. "We've lost different aspects of our culture. We're not officially recognized by Congress as Indigenous people even though Hawai'i is our homeland. We lead in poor health, education, poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and more. We hope

OPPOSITE:  
Lloyd Kumulā'au-Sing, **Ki'i akua (Kū)**; 2019; 'ie'ie round and split round rootlet fiber, mother of pearl shell, *uhiuhi* wood, canine teeth, *hili kukui* (candlenut tree bark dye); two ply forward and reverse twine weaving, lashed teeth, shell and wood; 24 x 7 x 6 in.

THIS PAGE:  
TOP: Lloyd Kumulā'au Sing and May Haunani Balino-Sing; 2022; sorting cleaned 'ie'ie rootlets, round and split round

BOTTOM:  
Kumulā'au Sing and Haunani Balino-Sing holding three of their *ki'i akua* (deity) images; 2019; 'ie'ie (*Freycinetia arborea*) and rattan fiber, mother of pearl shell, canine teeth, wood; two and three ply weft twine weaving, lashed teeth; Haunani's image, 24 x 11 x 11 in.; Kumulā'au's image, 23 x 7 x 6 in.

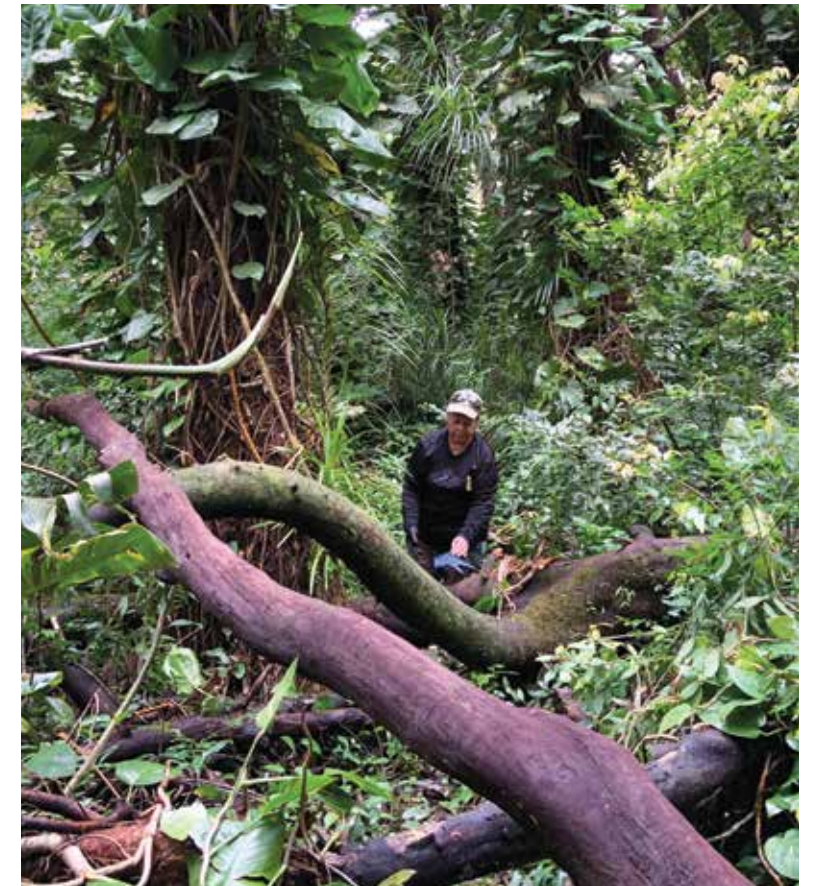




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HERE: Lloyd Kumulā'au Sing; mahiole pōheoheo (six knobbed prop helmet) that was traditionally used as a helmet of marshals in old Hawai'i.; 'ie'ie split dyed and natural fiber; two ply forward and reverse weft twine weaving; 14 x 9 x 7 in.

OPPOSITE: May Haunani Balino-Sing among the trees that have 'ie'ie climbing; 2022



that when our people see the artistry of 'ie'ie basketry and the ki'i akua, it will restore a sense of pride."

Twenty-five years ago, he was teaching Hawaiian Culture at the Kamehameha Schools when he challenged his students to learn a cultural practice, such as stringing a lei or playing slack key guitar. To learn along with the teens, he decided to try 'ie'ie weaving, which he had discovered in a video showcasing various Hawaiian master artisans. One artist and researcher in particular is Patrick Horimoto, who in the 1980s began single-handedly reviving the basketry that was found only in museums.

Like Horimoto, Sing taught himself to weave by studying any available resource and, by 1999, he was giving demonstrations. During one, he met Raymond Nakama, a student of Horimoto. Nakama, like Horimoto, was not Hawaiian yet he became Sing's mentor until his death 12 years later.

"Raymond was a jack-of-all-trades, all things Hawaiian," says Kumulā'au Sing. "He took me on as a student because he felt I would be able to take this knowledge further because I am Hawaiian. He taught me to pay attention to details; do good quality work.

"Raymond looked at pre-contact Hawaiian artifacts that were made with excellence. He stressed to do things *maiau*—clean, neat work—whether you're making a sled, a basket, or a helmet. That's what will distinguish your work from another's.

"It is a good reminder for our *lāhui* (nation) to be proud of their heritage, said Sing. [As Native Hawaiians] we don't have a lot to call our own due to effects of colonization and American suppression. We want them to look at the legacy of excellence left by our ancestors and be inspired. As culture bearers, Haunani and I see ourselves as a bridge."





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OPPOSITE:  
May Haunani Balino-Sing holding her *ki'i akua, Lono*; 2019; rattan split round reed, mother of pearl shell, *hili kukui* (candlenut tree bark dye; two ply forward and reverse twine weaving; 24 x 11 x 11 in.

THIS PAGE  
TOP: Lloyd Kumulā'au Sing, closing of the *hīna'i 'ōpae* (shrimp funnel trap); 2022; rattan split round reed; two and three ply weft twine weaving; 31 x 18 x 5 in.

BOTTOM:  
May Haunani Balino-Sing holding a bundle of harvested 'ie'ie aerial rootlets; 2022



Kumulā'au taught the weaving techniques to Haunani, a former professional hula dancer and Hawaiian resource teacher. Together they formed a company, Ke Kumu Hawai'i (The Hawaiian Source), based in O'ahu, that teaches *haumāna* (students) to coexist with the land by spiritually connecting with 'āina (land) and its natural resources in the same way their ancestors did. 'Ie'ie weaving is one way to do that. Like their mentors, they also welcome non-Native Hawaiians as students because, said Kumulā'au, basketry is universal and part of every culture. They want to help all people find their innate skills and connect with their own ancestors.

With support from the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, the Sings now teach cohorts of students on several islands so that they will become the next generation of practitioners and teachers.

The 'ie'ie plant, also known as the wild pandanus vine, grows throughout the Hawaiian islands in forests at 1,000 through 4,500-foot elevations; the vine is visible at the top of trees. Its thin aerial rootlets grow as much as 20 feet in length in terrain that's

generally wet and difficult to reach. Mature rootlets are harvested during the summer when drier conditions make it safer to gather in the mountains.

When the students are proficient in their basketry, they are introduced to the forest and taught protocols to harvest 'ie'ie from its environment. Currently, Hawai'i is experiencing a fungal growth on the trees that host 'ie'ie. To avoid spreading the fungus, the Sings teach students to weave using split round reed (rattan).

The weaver uses 'ie'ie rootlets for warps and wefts when weaving the *ki'i akua hulu manu*, or feathered war god images, which were the traditional deities of past ruling chiefs. The wide gaping mouths of the *ki'i* were designed to look angry to instill fear in one's enemies. Starting at the center, the focal point, the 'ie'ie rootlets are twined up, down, forward and in reverse, working with two or three wefts, to achieve the contours in the



HERE :Lloyd  
Kumulā'au  
Sing and  
May Haunani  
Balino-Sing;  
2022; mahiole  
(helmet), hīna'i  
(baskets and  
fish traps)  
deities, hats;  
two-and  
three-ply weft  
twine weaving  
including reverse



deity's face. The more warps and wefts used, the thicker and sturdier the image. Using more wefts can appear ropelike, said Haunani Sing. When using longer rootlets, the weave looks clean and consistent.

"What our ancestors believed and produced was appropriate for their time," said Haunani. "We teach our students with different intentions. We've expanded our knowledge and cultural practice, so the images students create represent their own relationships. When you spend months weaving, pouring your *mana* (energy) into this, it becomes part of you. We see the students' *ki'i* being born from their hands, with love. They will pass this on to their children."

Kumulā'au said, "The beauty of creating, for me, is learning and applying different skills to create the image—from carving wooden pegs for the *ki'i*'s eyes and affixing them against the *pā* (mother of pearl shell), to lashing canine teeth for the mouth and producing kukui bark dyes and applying an oil finish."

Unlike their ancestors, the Sings refrain from using feathers to cover these contemporary images of deities in order to highlight the workmanship, artistry, and beauty of 'ie'ie style basketry. Together, they have woven nine *ki'i* over the past two decades.

"My interest in Hawaiian material cultural has allowed us to meet great teachers who shared their knowledge," said Kumulā'au. "It is not ours to keep. We want to pass it on to others who, in turn, will continue teaching people, uplifting Hawaiians, and hopefully inspiring other Pacific Island and Indigenous communities."

\* <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/10/14/2016-23720/procedures-for-reestablishing-a-formal-government-to-government-relationship-with-the-native>

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